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Sullivan, Sian (2011) Green: going beyond 'the money shot'. Spectacular Environmentalisms.

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In the film [Green](#) we bear witness to the violent stripping of vibrant, diverse and dynamic forested landscapes to make way for industrial palm oil monoculture. Communities of elephant, families of orangutan, and the multispecies weave of old-growth forest are felled to make way for the single West African palm species (*Elaeis guineensis* Jacq.) and its attendant ecology of workers, consumers and machines. We are soothed by the voice of the forest, as it speaks in layers of animal and bird calls, wind rustling through trees, and running water; then to be aurally assaulted by the harsh and relentless noise of machines, themselves intimately associated with the fossil fuels that palm oil biofuels seek to replace. Both landscapes are green, and both might claim the nomenclature of 'forest'. But the qualitative biophysical, economic, cultural and affective differences between them are acute. The complex commodity assemblage that arises in service to palm oil production communicates and interacts with us in a different mode to that of the forested cultural landscape it displaces. This is the language of industrial and finance capital, and of life and labour as alienated commodity. It replaces a language of socio-ecological relationships rooted in places, with one of extraction and conversion to satisfy distant demands and hungers.

In between is a wound that can never be fully masked. The transition between these two green landscapes requires nothing less than a scorched earth policy. Palm monoculture plantations can only be planted in cleared land. They encourage the ripping away of unique forest expressions of emplaced evolution to create a ground zero moment of apocalyptic desolation. In *Green*, this is signified by the haunting and traumatising image of an isolated orangutan mother and baby scrabbling up the last remaining tree in a futile attempt to escape the destruction that is all around. The dehumanising brutality of this transformation speaks further as we watch a retrieved, lone orangutan being transported in the back of a truck. None of the onlookers appear able to feel enough to stop its head from repetitively hitting the hard metal of the truck floor, or to comfort and connect through gentle physical contact. And it is almost too shocking to write of the image of an orangutan stretched out on bare earth between cords tied to ankles and wrists.



Genre

In *Green* this story is told through the juxtaposition of images and the affective sensuality of sound. There is no narration. The story emerges nonlinearly. For the most part there is no overlain music: the soundtrack is generated simply by the sounds emerging from and accompanying what is filmed. Its pace is that of the movement of its images in realtime. The forest generally is slow and entangled: each movement generated and connected seamlessly with that of something else. The scenes of chainsaws converting ancient hardwoods to logs on their way to become floorboards and pulp for paper, and of the industrial palm oil production line, are more jagged, linear and abrupt. Those of supermarket and fuel station consumption of palm oil end products are somewhat more frenetic.

Green destabilises what is conventional in the natural history film industry. Its montage style has been referred to on this site as [arthouse](#), [political/documentary film](#) and as [experimental film](#). With its explicit raising of the effects on biodiversity of forest clearance it might also

claim the distinction of ‘conservation film’, defined by Chris Palmer in *Shooting in the wild* (2010, Sierra Club Books, p.163) as ‘films that motivate viewers to take action’. Rouxel himself speaks of his work as ‘[poetic film](#)’. This reflects well *Green*’s generation of narrative through suggestion, and the affective power of its visual and aural aesthetics.

For me *Green* is a contemporary *activist* film, iterating a style of work common for film-makers using their skill and art to convey critique with political content and to motivate for change. This is a post-modern genre that maximises the production and distribution possibilities enabled by a rapidly changing and more democratically available digital technology, and that seeks to startle and galvanise through careful construction of image bricolage. Such contemporary non-narrative film provocations were pioneered in *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), *Powaqqatsi* (1987) and *Baraka* (1992), associated with director/producer Godfrey Reggio and cinematographer Ron Fricke; and by BBC producer [Adam Curtis](#), maker of radical TV series such as [The Mayfair Set](#) (1999), [The Century of the Self](#) (2002) and [The Power of Nightmares](#) (2005).

Particular to *activist film*, however, is an emphasis on making material available at low or no cost. To inform as a means of encouraging action. Value here is beyond monetary recompense or even viewer numbers. At social movement gatherings over the last ten or so years I have been given, or acquired through minimal monetary donation, similarly made image-montage films highlighting the contexts giving rise to circumstances such as those documented in *Green*, as well as associated resistances. Examples include, [Trading Freedom: The Secret Life of the FTAA](#) (Indymedia), [The Fourth World War](#) ([Big Noise Films](#)), and [Venezuela Bolivariana](#) (Calle y Media Collective). Availability through sharing is emphasised further through uploads on sites such as [IFIwatch.tv](#), as well as now through [YouTube](#) and via BitTorrent protocol peer-to-peer sharing. As activist films, these are made so as to circulate through word-of-mouth and practices of sharing, and are created with passion regarding the structural contemporary circumstances giving rise to extreme inequity and violent social and ecological transformation. *Green*, which can be downloaded for free from the film’s [website](#), has been made with this poetic activist intent of informing through both radical content and revolutionary sharing. This is film-making as service to an attempt to make a difference rather than a profit. Films where any ‘money shot’ is radically emptied of monetary value.

The money shot

Natural history and ‘wildlife’ films create revealed nature through technological mediations that engender particular viewer affects. This is an *entertainment industry*. At [Wildscreen 2010](#) the buzzwords were *pitching* and *ratings*. How to pitch an idea for a film such that it attracts investment and network support? And how to capture audience ratings, a measure of income and of likely future work? It is an industry embedded within capitalist social relations that needs to generate income and profit so as to continue and grow. As stated by National Geographic’s Senior Vice President of Strategic Development and Co-Finance in one of Wildscreen’s introductory sessions, ‘we are a commercial network and we have to do stuff that fits in a commercial world. Don’t waste your time on your passion if it’s not commercial’.

As such, there is an in-built tendency for film-makers to seek to produce the affects that may guarantee viewer numbers on commercial networks. In a session entitled ‘Wild Stories’ by Frank Ash of [bbcacademy.com](#), a commercial training site for filmmakers outside the BBC, filmmakers thus were instructed on the need to ‘hunt the big idea’ and tell stories that are

compelling. To arouse anticipation and satisfy with drama. These seem positively correlated with the degree of danger and discomfort experienced by the film-maker(s), such that this is an industry infused with heroism, adrenalin and not a small amount of machismo. Presenters in a masterclass entitled 'Constructing truths and other ethical dilemmas' spoke of the tendency to appeal to a male demographic with 'fightshots, blood and bedlam' so as to produce 'primetime for Joe six-pack'. This, they commented, is enhanced if accompanied by a gorgeous female presenter – 'a bit of a babe' – especially if she is in great danger and we can 'pump up' the feeling of her fear. As Chris Palmer (referred to above) writes, 'when your prime goal is to get male viewers eighteen to thirty-five to watch your channel, programs like [Bear Feeding Frenzy](#) [featuring violent attacks on lifelike human mannequins] will get broadcast' (p. 149).

Andrew Jackson, Head of the BBC Natural History Unit, asserted in a session on 'Movers and shakers' in the industry, that natural history film is 'the decent man's pornography'. As in pornography, impetus and drive is related to the search for ways of finding and making 'the money shot'. The heart-stopping moment. These tend to be associated with extremes: with rarity, sensational behaviour, and otherwise un(fo)reseen views and activities. As well as with a disproportionate emphasis on copulation. Palmer again writes that in such literal 'nature porn' '[m]ating scenes are shown repeatedly without context, explanation or any type of narrative device whatsoever', sometimes 'freeze-framing at the point of entry during intercourse' and featuring '[c]lose-ups of male and female genitals' (p. 145). The possibilities currently are enhanced by a swathe of digital film technologies, from the latest Computer Generated Imaging (CGI) to 3D (referred to as 'a brilliant, brilliant new playground for us all', by Celia Taylor, commissioning editor of factuals and features for Sky, in a Wildscreen 2010 session on the industry's 'New Frontiers'). The industry is continually looking to the future to see where to go next, and to capture the value that comes from being the one who gets to or invents the cutting edge first. In combination these create and iterate the frontier of wildlife film-making – the *making* of 'wildlife' with film – as an action drama with a rhythm of anticipation, climax and satisfaction. (As George Schaller, 'nature's greatest defender', noted in a session devoted to his life's work, you don't want to 'hit folks with the money shot right away').

These contexts tend towards excitement, hyperbole and hyperstimulation. While acting to connect people with 'wildlife' by bringing distant and exotic creatures and spaces into the familiarity of our living rooms via TV, they also can generate and reinforce profound separations. As applauded in Wildscreen's 'Grand Opening Event' by a VIP speaker from Abu Dhabi's environment agency, this is an industry that enthrals viewers with images and footage of the planet to create 'a window to the excitement that nature provides', thus 'bringing nature into peoples' lives where they would not normally have access to it'. But, as Jim Igoe also notes [here](#), there is a paradoxical *disconnective* aspect to this. It seems to emphasise that 'real nature' is somewhere else. It isn't to be found in the mundane and rather less dramatic natures amongst which we live and share our lives daily. And it can make of our embodied interactions with material nature, as opposed to the virtual natures made possible through digital technology, somewhat less exciting and energising as a result. The need to attend to audience entertainment and satisfaction so as to secure ratings also mitigates against communication of the contexts of destructive ecological transformation within which wildlife film stories frequently are embedded. As noted in the Wildscreen session on ethics mentioned above, there's an in-built avoidance of 'bursting the bubble at the end of a film' to show the reality of the threats to the nature on which the film is based.

There are some uncomfortable aspects to this set of observations. A corollary here might be the way(s) in which pornography – the mass circulation of representations with explicit sexual content – structures expectations and experiences of bodies, sex, and sexuality. The immense volume of porn consumption (accounting for some 25% of film rentals and being the fourth reason given for going online, reported in Doidge, p. 102, see below) renders relevant a consideration of its social effects and parallels with other entertainment industries, including natural history film.

The porn film industry similarly extends into 3D and CGI, as well as into variously and often sado-masochistically violent scenarios that are disembodied and larger-than-life, having little to do with real people, fleshy bodies and erotic sensuality. What is instructive here is that the cathartic satisfactions engendered through porn consumption are known to actively disrupt brain neurochemistry, creating insatiable cravings, a demand for enhanced stimulation through evermore monstrous scenarios, and with disconnecting effects on real world bodies and relationships. As documented by [Norman Doidge](#) in his work on neuroplasticity (in *The brain that changes itself*, 2007, Viking), contemporary porn viewing activates release of the reward ‘drug’ brain dopamine, quickly creating actual addiction to the pleasure-high that this generates. As with other addictive cravings, tolerance and desensitisation increases with repetition of these cycles, requiring evermore extreme stimulation and generating greater disconnect from real persons and bodies. Doidge reports that a frequent side-effect of such addictive cycles is a dramatic reduction in the capacity to love, accompanied by a dehumanised splitting of sexual rewards from qualities such as friendship, affection and caring that support sustained relationship.

This may seem a little extreme, but there are echoes of these dynamics in the natural history and wildlife film industry. Palmer (mentioned above), for example, repeatedly notes the adrenaline rush created by a focus on aggression, sex and violence in some wildlife films, and speaks of the likelihood for ‘[p]eople who consume a heavy diet of wildlife films filled with stage violence and aggression’ to be more disposed ‘to think about nature as a circus or freak show’ (p. 9). Such exposure mitigates against connective and empathic feelings and behaviours towards the diversity of beings with whom we share our environs and the planet as a whole. It raises questions about the likelihood of technological enhancement, sensationalism and the extreme to encourage engagements with life’s diversity that support its flourishing.

(Re)connections

There are notable exceptions in the wildlife and natural history film industry. As with *Green*, these tend to emphasise the ordinary extraordinary-ness of everyday natures and human-nonhuman interactions, and to be characterised by the quiet and calm, as well as the drama, that infuses ecological dynamics. Key here, and as Dan Brockington elaborates towards the close of his 2009 book *Celebrity and the Environment* (Zed Books), is the BBC series [Springwatch](#) and [Autumnwatch](#). These are associated with live streaming of high quality videos from webcams positioned to follow, in real time, the activities of species and places. The rhythm and pace of this ‘real nature’, whilst always moving and changing, is anything but dramatic whilst, as with *Green*’s witnessing of the Indonesian forest, it is aesthetically beautiful, poetic and sometimes funny. Nevertheless, even here the BBC works to entice audiences to the current *Autumnwatch* broadcast series by

billing it as ‘visiting our most iconic wild places and revealing new and surprising wildlife stories’ ([here](#)).

The contemporary ability to stream live webcam footage via the internet in real time constitutes a transformation in natural history filming (as, incidentally, it also has done in pornography via chat rooms and live webcam sites). It is the technology behind a new generation of ‘virtual safaris’ based on live streaming of film footage which seem to enable democratic and immersive experiences of wildlife by permitting viewers to observe the unfolding of ‘real’ nature stories in real time, as well as to participate in discussion via online comment options. As South African 3D film-maker and live broadcasting entrepreneur [Graham Wallington](#) of [WildEarth](#)TM stated in an interview at Wildscreen, ‘the technology breaks down space. You don’t have to physically be there to be there. It permits the scaling up of access without increasing impacts.’

Also attracting interest is footage gained through ‘camera-traps’ – cameras separate from a camera-person that are hidden and camouflaged so that animals become filmed through their own unprovoked or unstaged approach. For me these produced the most powerful footage I saw at Wildscreen. It is as though what is filmed is done so through the animal’s agency and pace in approaching and interacting with the camera. There is a directness here that staged and technologically enhanced or presenter-led footage can miss.

These are interesting innovations that appear to offer greater human-nonhuman connectivity, more democratic access to distant ‘wild nature’, and to permit other species to somehow reveal themselves with relatively little construction of shots. Exclusions remain however. All of these continue to present animal and other natures as distinct and separate from human culture. Natural, rather than social. Other, rather than kin. Outside. This is a conceptual zeitgeist made possible through the radical separation and exclusion of human cultures from spaces where wildlife now is found and conserved, and the silencing of the other nature knowledges enacted by such peoples (also see Dan Brockington’s piece [here](#)). Even *Green* remains quiet on this point, making no comment on the indigenous *human* ecologies that also once inhabited the forests razed to make way for palm oil. It of course is important not to minimise the hunting and other pressures embodied by indigenous Dayak populations on the reduced land areas now available to them. At the same time, remaining forests and orangutan habitat also is the outcome of sustaining socio-ecologies existing in the region for millennia. Indeed, contemporary parks such as [Betung Kerihun National Park](#) in West Kalimantan remain home to both Dayak villages and orangutan populations.

Non-engagement with the ‘counter-ontologies’ of indigenous and other socio-ecologies effects a profound foreclosure of possible diversities and sustainabilities. It diminishes our collective ability to engender, embody and re-compose equitable ways of living in relationship with the diverse beings with whom we are entangled

here on earth. Refractions of the modern status quo producing the socio-ecological devastations revealed in *Green* require different forms of affective, embodied and political engagement. Technology can support and mediate these. To do so it needs to be utilised in service to embodied connection with material natures so as to enhance familiarity, kinship and appreciation, rather than reinforcing a virtualising impetus that disconnects and disembodies through extremes, titillation and voyeurism. Notwithstanding its own silences, *Green* is a significant opening of this possibility of dancing with, rather than dominating and destroying, the other beings with whom we live here.



All images are screen-shots from the film
Green.